

Department of the Interior
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Washington Fish and Wildlife Office
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News Release



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The Status of Giant Palouse Earthworm Will Get a Closer Look

Public comments accepted until September 20, 2010

A large white earthworm native to portions of Idaho and Washington will undergo a status review to determine if the species warrants protection under the Federal Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announced today. The giant Palouse earthworm, a species first described in 1897, was once thought to be abundant in the Palouse area but has rarely been seen in the intervening 113 years and only at a handful of sites. The most recent sighting, earlier this year, located a group of worms believed to be giant Palouse earthworms near Moscow, Idaho. An earlier survey found the species near Ellensburg, Washington.

Today's announcement responds to a 2009 petition by the Friends of the Clearwater, Center for Biological Diversity, Palouse Audubon, Palouse Prairie Foundation, and the Palouse Group of the Sierra Club. Following a 90-day review of information provided by the petitioners, the Service determined that substantial information was presented to indicate that the species may warrant listing as a threatened or endangered species and will now initiate a status review to determine whether listing the species is warranted. Based on that review, the Service will issue a 12-month finding on the petition. A proposal to determine critical habitat for the species will be made if a listing action is proposed.

An earlier 90-day finding, published by the Service on October 9, 2007, stated that a 2006 petition did not provide substantial scientific or commercial information to indicate listing the species might be warranted. The 2009 petition included additional information.

Early descriptions and collection sites indicated the species was endemic to the Palouse bioregion and utilized grassland sites with good soil and native vegetation. Since then much of the Palouse grasslands have been cleared of native vegetation and converted to agricultural, residential or commercial use. Widespread habitat conversion for agriculture and development, and introduction of non-native earthworms may have affected the ability of the area to support giant Palouse earthworms.

Ongoing efforts to conserve and restore native habitats in the Palouse bioregion may benefit the giant Palouse earthworm. In recent years a few giant Palouse earthworms have been found in remnant native habitats in the Palouse bioregion but surveyors have not found the species in farmed or previously farmed habitats.

To ensure that the status review initiated today is comprehensive, the Service is requesting scientific and

commercial data and other information regarding the giant Palouse earthworm. To allow adequate time to conduct this review, the agency requests that such information be provided on or before September 20, 2010.

You may submit information by one of the following methods:

1) Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>. In the box that reads “Enter Keyword or ID,” enter the docket number for this notice, which is docket number FWS-R1-ES-2010–0023. Check the box that reads “Open for Comment/Submission,” and then click the Search button. You should then see an icon that reads “Submit a Comment.” Please ensure that you have found the correct rulemaking before submitting your comment.

2) U.S. mail or hand-delivery: Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R1-ES-2010–0023FWS; Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 222; Arlington, VA 22203. We will post all information received on <http://www.regulations.gov>. This generally means that we will post any personal information you provide us (see the Information Solicited section below for more details).

After September 20, 2010, you must submit information directly to the Field Office: Ken Berg, Manager, Washington Fish and Wildlife Office, 510 Desmond Dr. SE, Suite 102, Lacey, WA 98503; by telephone (360-753-9440); or by facsimile (360-753-9405). If you use a telecommunications device for the deaf (TDD) please call the Federal Information Relay Service (FIRS) at 800–877–8339. Please note that we might not be able to address or incorporate information that we receive after the above requested date.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.

—FWS—

Giant Palouse Earthworm (*Driloleirus americanus*) 90-Day Finding Questions and Answers July 12, 2010

What did the Fish and Wildlife Service decide? What is a 90-day finding?

The Fish and Wildlife Service determined that substantial information was presented in the petition to indicate that the giant Palouse earthworm may warrant protection under the Federal Endangered Species Act. The Service made the announcement in response to a 2009 petition by the Friends of the Clearwater, Center for Biological Diversity, Palouse Audubon, Palouse Prairie Foundation-, and the Palouse Group of the Sierra Club. A 90-day finding is a preliminary review of information presented in the petition and information that is readily available in Service files to determine if threats are acting on the species such that the status of the species may be endanger of extinction now or in the foreseeable future.

What is the next step? Does this mean species will be listed?

Because the Service found that substantial information was presented in the petition indicating that listing the giant Palouse earthworm may be warranted, we are initiating a status review. During the status review the Service will review additional information on the giant Palouse earthworm. In the Federal Register notice announcing the 90-day finding, the Service

requested specific information on the species, such as information on the species' biology, range, population trends, threats, habitats, etc. This and other available information will be considered during the status review.

Because the Act's standards for 90-day and 12-month findings are different, a substantial 90-day finding does not always mean that the 12-month finding will result in listing. Based on the status review the agency will issue a 12-month finding on the petition which will address whether or not the petitioned action is warranted.

Where does the giant Palouse earthworm occur?

The giant Palouse earthworm, a species first described in 1897, was once thought to be abundant in the Palouse area of Washington and Idaho, but has been rarely seen in the intervening 113 years and in only a few sites. The species was also found in the hills west of Ellensburg, Washington. The earthworm has been found in remnant native habitats, but not all potential habitats have been surveyed.

What threats may impact the giant Palouse earthworm?

Early descriptions and collection sites indicated the species was endemic and utilized Palouse grassland sites with good soil and native vegetation. Since the discovery of the species much of the Palouse grasslands have been cleared of native vegetation and converted to agricultural, residential or commercial use. Threats to the species may include conversion and loss of habitat from agriculture and development and the introduction and presence of non- native earthworms. At this point there is limited information on the habitats, and therefore the threats in the Ellensburg area. The biology and life history of the giant Palouse earthworm is not completely understood due in part to the difficulty of surveying the species, and limited surveys and other studies on the species.

If the species does become listed, how might a listing affect landowners or agriculture?

Recently, the giant Palouse earthworm has only been found in undisturbed or untilled habitat. Therefore, whether or not the species becomes listed, conservation of the species should include maintenance of remaining undisturbed habitat. If the species becomes listed in the future, activities that impact remnant native habitats will likely be of greater concern than activities on existing disturbed ground. If the species is listed the Service will provide more guidance in the listing rule on activities that may affect or harm the species.

What can a landowner do to help conserve this native species?

As with most species, habitat is key. Unfortunately, not a lot known is known about the giant Palouse earthworms' habitat or its life history. The Service recognizes that there are ongoing efforts to conserve and restore native habitats in the Palouse bioregion. These efforts may benefit the giant Palouse earthworm. In recent years a few giant Palouse earthworms have been found in remnant native habitats in the Palouse bioregion. Surveyors have not found the giant Palouse earthworm in farmed or previously farmed habitats.

The Service recommends that landowners who wish to conserve the giant Palouse earthworm do so by maintaining existing prairie remnants or other previously undisturbed habitats. These remnants can also be enhanced, restored, or buffered with untilled habitats which may be eligible for cost-share or rental payments through existing programs. These programs include, but may not be limited to: the State Acres for wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) practice of continuous-signup CRP, other Farm Bill programs, or the Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. Technical assistance is available from the Service, State wildlife agencies, and/or the US Department of Agriculture. Regardless of a future listing decision on the giant Palouse earthworm, the Service supports development of best management practices and conservation strategies to conserve species and the habitats upon which they depend.